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The aftermath of public  
outdoor relief in Brooklyn

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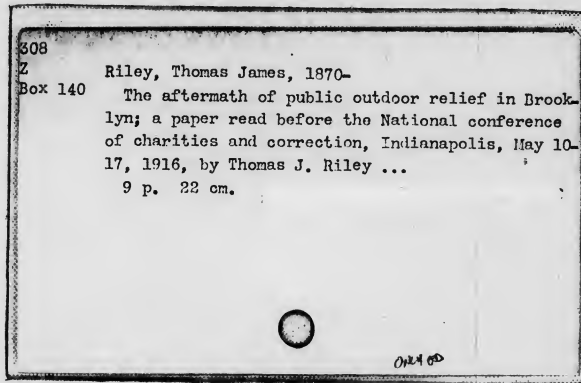
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# The Aftermath of Public Outdoor Relief in Brooklyn

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A Paper Read Before The

## National Conference of Charities and Correction

Indianapolis, May 10-17, 1916

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THE AFTERMATH OF PUBLIC OUTDOOR RELIEF  
IN BROOKLYN

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With a few noteworthy exceptions, there were no papers presented to the National Conference of Charities and Correction on the subject of public outdoor relief between 1890 and 1915. Last year the Conference came back to the subject with a relish. Several causes have contributed to this awakened interest, among which may be mentioned the enactment of mothers' pension laws in twenty-eight states in the brief space of five years and the growing belief that the State should do much more than it has done in the past for the promotion of the social welfare. Three recent studies of the laws and of the administration of public outdoor relief have also helped to bring the subject to the attention of social workers.

In the earlier literature on this topic the experience of Brooklyn, then a city by itself, played a conspicuous part. It is not surprising therefore that in the reopening of the subject Brooklyn's experience should be reviewed and the history be brought up to date. I presume it was for this reason that your Chairman asked me to read a paper on Public Outdoor Relief in Brooklyn — the Aftermath of 1878. I invite your attention first to a brief historical statement and second to a more critical examination of Brooklyn's experience and of the subject in general.

Public outdoor relief was abolished in Brooklyn by the Board of Supervisors, January 31, 1878, on the opinion of their legal adviser that such relief was illegal. The opinion held that the class entitled to support included only those unable to earn their own living and the law provided that they should be maintained in poor houses provided by the county, where the

relief could be supervised by those authorized to do so. The only exception to this was that temporary relief might be given to the sick, lame, or otherwise disabled, until and only until it became practicable to remove the person to the almshouse.

The counsel advised the supervisors therefore that all money granted in aid of the poor contrary to these plain provisions was illegal, and that the overseers were liable to indictment. Whereupon public outdoor relief in Brooklyn was terminated in the middle of the winter of 1878, a winter of more than ordinary severity.

The main facts about the abolition of such relief in Brooklyn may be briefly summarized as follows:

1. Prior to its abolition the number of persons receiving public relief in their homes increased faster than the population, and in 1877 amounted to 46,330 persons. In 1878 this aid was stopped. Notwithstanding this there followed a decrease rather than an increase in the number of persons cared for in the public institutions as compared with the population of Brooklyn.
2. During the ten years next preceding 1878, Kings County, that is Brooklyn, spent an average of almost \$129,000 a year for the relief of persons in their own homes, while the Brooklyn Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor, the chief private relief society in Brooklyn at that time, spent on the average \$22,252 a year for material relief. Although public outdoor relief was entirely cut off, this society gave an average of \$18,981 a year for the six years following 1878. In other words, the abolition of public relief was followed by a decrease in the relief disbursements from private sources also.
3. The abolition of public outdoor relief did not cause any increase of distress among the poor or any increase of the number of children in private institutions at the expense of the County under the provisions of the Children's Law of 1875 which made it illegal throughout the state to keep children over three years of age in the almshouse.

In a word, the stoppage of public outdoor relief in Brooklyn caused some 46,000 persons to depend upon themselves instead of upon charity, whether public or private, and there was no increase in distress among the poor.

The only approach to an exception to this statement that has come to my attention was made by a committee of the Boston Overseers of the Poor. After admitting a great diminution of pauperism in Brooklyn, and after admitting that it was not attended by any increase in distress, the committee contended that the number of children in institutions increased because families could not get aid in their homes. Let us see what con-

nection, if any, the number of county wards in private institutions had with the abolition of public outdoor relief, for this is the largest question in the aftermath of public outdoor relief in Brooklyn.

Speaking before this conference in 1888, Robert Treat Paine said, "For myself I believe the fact will prove to be that the excessive outdoor relief before 1878 in Brooklyn, and the great number of children in institutions were two independent evils — each susceptible of reform and each needing to be reformed as much as the other — and that the increasing flow of children into institutions came from other causes, chiefly the lax interpretation of the Children's Law of 1875, and had begun several years before outdoor relief was abolished and continued for several years more, till in 1883 judicious administration began to reduce the evil and to lessen the number of dependent children."

When the State Children's Law of 1875 went into effect there were about 300 children in the nursery of the almshouse in Brooklyn. Four years later, 1879, there were 1,404 children in private institutions at the expense of the county, and after four years, 1883, there were 1,492 such children. This increase caused the Commissioners of Charities and Correction to make a thorough inquiry as to the necessity of these commitments, as a result of which they discharged 390 children at the request of their parents and 265 on their own initiative in a single year, a total of 655. In the meantime they admitted only 476 new ones. By the end of another year the total number of such dependent children had been reduced to 1,231. The number of children increased from the time the law was enacted in 1875 to 1883, but it then declined because of the more rigid enforcement of the law following this inquiry.

It is doubtful whether the abolition of public outdoor relief in 1878 had anything to do with the number of children in private institutions as county wards, but if it is claimed that there is any connection one could only say that its abolition tended to decrease the number of such children because the percentage of increase was greater before than after the abolition of public outdoor relief.

Let us consider also what happened under the Children's Law in Manhattan, then New York City. Manhattan had already abolished public outdoor relief when the Children's Law went into effect in 1875. In that year Manhattan had 9363 dependent children at a yearly cost of \$757,858. Ten years later, that is in 1885, she had 20,003 dependent children, of whom all, except 747 diseased or defective ones, were in private institutions at

the county's expense, costing all told for the year \$1,505,759. That is with no change as to public outdoor relief, and with no rigid inquiry as there was in Brooklyn, the number of county wards in Manhattan and the annual cost of their keep doubled in ten years.

The abolition of public outdoor relief does not explain the increase in the number of children in private institutions at the expense of the public treasury. The explanation lies in the fact that public subsidies to private charities have everywhere tended to stimulate the supply of beneficiaries and in the additional fact that lax administration of public funds always tends toward excesses. The Children's Law in New York is no exception. Some nationalities, of whom there are great numbers in New York City, are disposed to put their children in these institutional schools where they may have board, education, and religious instruction at the public's expense. Some religious denominations encourage the commitment of children in order that they may have the continued religious training and oversight upon which great value is set. If to these powerful causes is added the fact that as much as three fourths of the cost of running these institutions may be secured from public funds as subsidies; and that there is always the temptation for officials to play favorites for personal, religious or political reasons; and that the Department of Public Charities formerly was swift to accept applications for commitment, and dilatory to reinvestigate and discharge cases, we have sufficient explanation of the increase in the number of children in subsidized institutions of New York City without bringing in the irrelevant question of public outdoor relief.

This brings us face to face with the very heart of the question, namely: does the experience of Brooklyn condemn the giving of charitable aid from public funds to persons in their own homes as such, or does it condemn only its administration as it was practiced there? Such considerations as the following have led me to believe that it was the administration and not the relief itself that failed in Brooklyn.

Probably no one today would advocate the method by which public outdoor relief was given in Brooklyn. One set of men, the Board of Supervisors, ordered the supplies and another set of men, the Commissioners of Charities, distributed them, and there was almost constant friction between them. Applicants for relief came with their baskets to the offices of the commissioners and carried away such relief in kind as they might receive.

No one has more ably or correctly described the situation than Mr. Alfred T. White, who was secretary of a group of about three hundred men and women who, inspired by the Elberfeld system, volunteered to visit the families who should apply for aid in the winter of 1877-78. He says:

"There were five distributing offices, to some one of which each ward of the city was assigned, each having its particular day for distribution. On these days many hundreds of women would often sit in a crowd for hours with their baskets waiting for their weekly dole. Paid visitors to the homes of the applicant had been tried and found worse than useless. One winter every applicant had been compelled to swear to her poverty; and still the number grew. It is difficult to conceive of a more demoralizing method of administering a system which is pernicious even when best handled than Brooklyn labored under until 1876.

As the visitors called on the applicants for aid, it was found of course that in the majority of cases there were able-bodied men, able to work and often at work. It was found the rule in tenement houses for every family to apply for relief, each woman feeling entitled to aid because her neighbor had aid. In some cases self-respecting women were compelled by their neighbors to take their baskets and demand public aid with the rest, because, presumably, no superiority in such manners would be tolerated. It appeared especially in the older wards that a large population calculated upon this public relief as a part of their annual income and were shiftless during the summer because sure of aid in the winter.

Many who said they would not take private aid regarded the public dole as an obligation due them by the county and demanded it accordingly; while on every hand it was seen that the system put a premium on misrepresentation and falsehood. In general it reached the class whom it did not benefit and failed to reach those who really needed aid but were supplied by private charity. No one could see his neighbor supported, in whole or in part, at the public expense without being tempted to draw rations from the same generous treasury, and industrious men and women were rapidly demoralized by this open reward to laziness and lying." (Lend a Hand, June 1886, page 335).

Such criticisms have generally been interpreted as reasons for the abolition of public outdoor relief, but as a matter of fact they were used by the Volunteer Visitors Association in an effort to reform the administration of such aid. Indeed the reforms had been all but accomplished when, to use the language of the New York Times, there came "into office a new Board of Supervisors anxious for political influence and greedy for patronage" and reversed the action of the old board and ordered a free disposition of groceries to be made as before. Then, and not until then, did the visitors give up hope and cease their efforts to reform the administration of the relief.

On January 24, 1878, only one week before the relief was abolished the visitors met and passed the following resolutions, which only hint in a single place at the abolition of relief:

"RESOLVED, that we denounce as dangerous and demoralizing and altogether bad the efforts of the Commissioners of Charities and of members of the present Board of Supervisors to reinstate a system which puts a premium on fraud and misrepresentation; which disgusts the respectable poor and attracts the worst classes; which tempts paupers to immigrate here from surrounding counties; which offers a reward to idleness and shiftlessness and discourages industry and thrift and which violates law and disgraces our civilization.

RESOLVED, that in the judgment of the visitors here present . . . . It is better, under the circumstances, to retire from the work when distribution of groceries begins and until the Board of Supervisors or the Commissioners are willing to heed our recommendations, lest our countenance to a bad cause may serve to blind the community to an evil which it unfortunately appears cannot be alleviated but must be exterminated."

Public outdoor relief was abolished only after attempts to reform its administration had failed. St. Louis, Baltimore, Washington and other cities also abolished it. Philadelphia abolished it except as to medical aid.

In other places the relief was not abolished but was reformed. Boston continued it and through careful administration has kept the number of beneficiaries and the amount of money spent well under control. Buffalo, by a reform in her methods of administration, and especially by a co-operation with the private charities, has kept its disbursements well within bounds.

The State of Indiana, through reform laws and good administration, has accomplished economies similar to those brought about elsewhere through the abolition of public outdoor relief. Mr. Amos W. Butler, Secretary of the Board of State Charities of Indiana, said before this conference last year:

"From a financial standpoint the saving has been remarkable. In 1895, under the old system, the total amounted to \$630,158. A year later it dropped to \$355,255. For the past eighteen years there has been an average annual reduction of \$346,364 from the amount given in 1895. The number receiving help was 82,235 in 1897, 50,403 in 1913; the reduction below 1897 has averaged 32,627 annually. Notwithstanding this the prediction that the new law would fill our poor asylums and orphan homes did not materialize. Our experiences were the same as that of other localities in this regard. As a matter of fact with a great reduction in outdoor relief we had also a decrease in poor asylum population. (Proceedings the National Conference of Charities and Correction, 1915, page 442).

The recent study of County Outdoor Relief in Missouri found the difficulties to lie in its administration, chief among which were: that the poor relief officers do not know the conditions and needs of those who are assisted and hence the relief is often an encouragement to indolence, drunkenness and immorality; that a surprisingly large proportion of the persons to whom they give aid are feeble-minded and hence the county money encourages or enables such persons to live at large and to propagate their kind, and that such unconsidered and misdirected charity fails to give relief adequately or wisely to the needy who apply and gives no relief to many who are most in need but least willing to ask help.

The recent study of Public Outdoor Relief in Dutchess County, New York, also found the difficulties to lie in its administration, among which may be mentioned: that the overseers with few exceptions lack the discrimination and experience necessary to efficient administration; that investigations when made are incomplete, but are seldom made, and that no attempt is made to learn of or eliminate the causes responsible for the distress, with the result that relief is given to families not in need of it, degenerate conditions due to mental or to moral defect are perpetuated and encouraged, and that relief to really needy families is generally insufficient or unsuitable and as administered encourages pauperism.

These failures in the administration of public outdoor relief demand its reform, but not necessarily its abolition. But the abolition of public outdoor relief is impossible in the smaller towns and in the rural districts where there is no other provision made for the destitute, and improbable in the great cities because of the tendencies toward social welfare legislation to which reference has already been made. The times demand that not less but more shall be done by the state for the relief of distress and the promotion of the well-being of the common people. The great challenge is this: can the public administration be made to conform to the highest standards of social service that have been worked out and keep itself free from pernicious influence?

Can the public administration be made to discriminate between the respectable poor on the one hand, who justly claim help and the feeble-minded, inebriate and immoral on the other, which classes require segregation and custodial care? Private charity makes these discriminations and the public charities should be able to do so all the more, because they have the means of examination and have or may have the authority to enforce their findings.

Can the public administration do the constructive work in addition to relief that the private charities have found to be so necessary to the rehabilitation of families? In 1900 Mr. Frederic Almy said before this conference:

"I doubt whether the agent of any poor office goes from place to place looking for fit employment to help a discouraged man who says he cannot find any, or to test a shirk who would run from work if he saw it. He does not overhaul the plumbing which has produced disease nor arrange the transfer of a family to a more sanitary or more moral environment. He does not persuade the landlord to wait for the rent, or argue with the holder of a chattel mortgage. He does not entice children to the settlements where they will get aspirations instead of alms and perhaps also a wholesome discontent with unnecessary squalor. He does not teach the mother how to earn or put a boy to a trade: in a word change the condition which caused the poverty. He can only relieve, and relief, we are all agreed, is the very lowest form of charity."

This observation is doubtless less apt today than it was sixteen years ago, for these things are being done in the probation work of the children's court, in the mother's aid work, in the social service connected with the public hospitals. It may take some time before the public administration can develop the kind of official and employee that can do this kind of work and before the taxpayers will be willing to pay for it. But there are no necessary reasons why this cannot be done by the public as well as it is done by the private agencies.

If we may judge from the reports that come from Denver it seems clear that county outdoor relief can be administered in a way not only to prevent pauperizing families but to rehabilitate them by a charity organization methods and to enlist the aid of volunteers. The advocates and administrators of the mothers' aid laws in the various states claim, and many who have been skeptical concerning them frankly confess, that the relief and aid of these families have been as satisfactory as those from private sources, while some claim for them great superiority.

Recently I had the privilege and duty of acting as an examiner of candidates for investigators under the Board of Child Welfare and the Bureau of Social Investigations of the Department of Public Charities of the City of New York. I am also frequently called upon to choose employees for a large charitable society. It is my judgment that those who presented themselves for the public employment compared very favorably with those employed for similar work in the private charitable societies. This has not always been so, but with the development of the

civil service and the opportunities for special training there is no reason why there may not be as high standards of qualifications and service in the public as in the private charities.

The charity organization movement has done much to develop the principles and to standardize the technique of case work with families, yet it may be that its greatest service will be to present these principles and this technique to the public administration and to educate the taxpayer to an appreciation of the value of a constructive service for families. In the knowledge of the shortcomings of the public administration in the past, even with the accumulating evidence from the fields of probation, mothers' pensions, hospital social service and the public health and schools, it requires a heroic faith to believe that we can have a public service in charity substantially free from error. But any smaller faith is unworthy of democracy and discounts the efforts through which we have hoped to purify and improve the public administration.

But I hail this new day of enlarged welfare service by the state, and of ennobled public administration, not so much for what it promises of charitable help to the poor, as for other and preferred services, such as the protection of the common people against want through accident compensation, health insurance, better hours and conditions of labor, the promotion of the public health, and the segregation of the degenerate. If these things are done then the problem of charitable aid will become manageable. This will not take away the place of voluntary funds, but should free them to initiate new services, demonstrate their value, elaborate their technique and principles, and pass them in turn over to the public service.

To sum up: public outdoor relief will not be abolished so long as the need of relief exists. It is found throughout the length and breadth of the country and where it has been abolished it is re-appearing in new forms such as mothers' pension. It is not the question of its existence but the manner of its administration that demands our most careful thought. We look forward to the day when industrial and social betterment shall reduce such gratuitous aid to a minimum and to a manageable character. To such a program of prevention and relief only the public funds can be made adequate. And if to their administration the highest technique and principles of social service can be applied we shall secure the happy result of maximum good and minimum harm.



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